

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH**SERIES TITLE: MARK 9:43-50 | SERMON TITLE: CUT IT OFF****DAVE WAGNER**

Every time Hollywood turns a book into a movie they ruin it. This is especially true of those stories which possess any spiritual value or intelligence. I think it's because Hollywood knows they have to pander to shallow, soulless moderns who need to see their own shallow ideas on the big screen in order to stay interested in the story. One of the best, or worst, examples of this was Lord of the Rings.

It was so bad, in fact, that I think the Tolkien family tried to sue the film maker! Be that as it may, the movie was an insubstantial shadow of the book. However, there were a handful of moments worth watching.

One of them comes at the end of the story, when Frodo and Gollum fight over the Ring. For those who don't know the story, the whole thing is based on a magic ring with power to dominate the world for evil. The good guys are trying to destroy the ring while the bad guys are searching for it to reclaim it.

At the end of the movie, Frodo, the good guy who is bringing the Ring to a volcano to destroy it, fights with Gollum, a bad guy who is trying to save the ring from destruction. They struggle inside the volcano on a strip of rock, overlooking a sea of red-hot lava.

Gollum, the bad guy, gets hold of the ring, loses his footing, and plummets to his death in the lava. Now here is where the movie has a redeeming moment.

In the movie, as Gollum plunges downward into the fire, the camera follows him to catch his joyous, thrilled expression, all because he has finally got hold of the ring. The last thing Gollum does before he hits the lava is lovingly clasp the ring to his breast; he looks totally unaware of the fact that he's about to die a fiery death. He's just rejoicing that he got the ring.

It's actually a pretty haunting scene. It only lasts a few seconds, but it does a better job of preaching the peril of sin than I could ever do. Gollum wants his evil ring, and he wants it more than life itself. That's madness, of course, since if you have to lose yourself to get the thing you want, you no longer have a self with which to enjoy the thing you want.

Now you realize Gollum didn't have to go into the fire, right? All he had to do was give up the ring once and for all. He could turn around and walk away and go wherever he pleased. He would have been free; no fire-lake swan-dive for him.

Well, easier said than done. Because if you know the story, you realize Gollum was consumed with that ring for more than five hundred years. That ring was more precious to him than his own hand, or his own foot, or his own eye. It was more precious than life itself; that's why he risked life and limb throughout the entire story to get it. That's why he ended up taking the fire-lake swan-dive. For Gollum to let go of the ring would have been too painful a parting. So he ended up in the fire.

Now in our text today we find the same idea. The heart of this text is an exhortation from Jesus. Here it is: Whatever gets in your way, whatever threatens to bring you to hell, whatever causes you to stumble, whatever hinders your faith and obedience, whatever deadens your desire for God and the kingdom: Cut It Off. For Gollum it was the ring. Gollum could have had life, but it would have taken a bloody amputation. What is it for you? What is threatening to make you lose heaven? What do you need to amputate?

What is stumbling you? Whatever it is, here is the command of Jesus to you: Let it go, gouge it out, cut it off.

Cut It Off

We see this direction from Jesus in vv43, 45 and 47. It is plain as day that Jesus wants us to do something so as to attain eternal life and avoid the fire of hell. We are to leave something behind, get rid of something, abandon something. We are to part forever with something, say goodbye, suffer some kind of permanent loss.

And just notice what imagery Jesus uses: He speaks of some of the most precious things we possess: Body Parts. I bet you would empty your bank account to keep your hand, your eye and your foot. I bet you would spare no expense. Rightly so, since if you lose one of these it hardly matters what you keep! A million dollars loses its luster if I have to trade my eyeball to get it!

What does this mean? It means that no matter how precious the item, whatever it is that threatens to keep us from the kingdom we are to part with it forever; we are to leave and never look back. Suppose it really was your eye or your foot you had to lose for the kingdom; would it be worth it?

Jesus' answer is an obvious "Yes". The kingdom of God is so valuable that even body parts don't compare with it. What God has in store for disciples is so good that if we have eyes to see, we would gladly trade our eyes to get it!

Now what sorts of things does Jesus have in mind? What does Jesus think we'll have to part with in order to attain the kingdom?

How about your reputation? You know you'll lose that if you speak up about righteousness and Christ at work. How about friendships? You are bound to lose some of those for Christ. Even more, there are friendships you should cut off and gouge out because they are stumbling you in your faith and obedience.

Some of you may need to cut off alcoholic drinks, not because they are evil, but because you can't use them well. They are deadening your faith. Some might need to drop smoking, some may need to stop eating fast food.

I expect some need to stop watching certain shows and films. They are filthy, full of fornication, foul language, murder and horror, all things which God hates; and how could the children of God really love what God hates? And how could such filth not weaken your obedience, your purity, your love and hope?

How can you listen to the world's music and not be defiled? How can you avoid thinking the world's thoughts and feeling their sensuous feelings if you are immersed in their pornographic music?

And it's likely that some men here, in order to make it to heaven, need to avoid the internet altogether. You need to take it off your phone, you need to block it on your computer. I expect some men need to never sit down at a computer again if they want to escape the sentence of hell. Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her commits adultery with her in his heart; better to gouge the eye out then keep the eye and go to hell.

Maybe some need to stay out of certain stores; maybe a clothing store or an outdoor's store or a gun store or a sporting store. Maybe some need to avoid the auto mall. Is this because these things are evil? No, it's because sin is deceitful and Jesus tells us to cut it off, whatever "It" happens to be.

Maybe some need to take their trophies and degrees and awards and hide them in a box in the attic. Maybe some need to forget about what they've accomplished, what they've written, what

they've achieved, what they're known for. Maybe they need to forget their impressive reputation, their spotless record, and anything else they've done which puffs them up with pride.

Maybe some need to stop reading the newspaper, or stop listening to political commentary. Maybe this only leads to anger, anxiety and fear. Maybe it produces a bitter heart; maybe it leads to worldliness.

I have expect some need to repent of social media for good and never return; their very souls are at stake. They need to gouge it out and cut it off. How grievous to think that some will be lost, in part, because they learned to trust in how many likes they get on Facebook rather than in the Crucified Christ.

Strangely, some might need to cut off ministry, or studying theology. I don't say they should cut off studying the Scripture, of course. But perhaps a man finds that ministry or theology have begun to weaken his faith and obedience. These, too, then, must be cut off.

Brothers, it could be anything. Examine yourselves. Identify your stumbling blocks and cut them off. Show no mercy.

The Rationale

Now what is Jesus' rationale for this direction? He says to cut off whatever stumbles us; why should we? Simply, because it's better to lose your hand than your self. Again he says that in vv43, 45 and 47.

Interestingly, Jesus even seems to envision men walking around in the kingdom missing eyes and limbs! That's kind of a silly picture, but it makes the point well. I'd rather have one hand in heaven than two in hell. Of course we won't be missing limbs in the kingdom, but you get the point.

The whole rationale is based on value. If I buy a commentary on Amazon for \$30, it's because I have deemed that commentary worth more than \$30; had I not deemed it so I would have kept my \$30 and not made the purchase. We are willing to give up what we value less in order to get what we value more. So what do you value more, your hand or heaven? Your money or heaven? Your porn or heaven? Your reputation or heaven? Jesus says we can't have both. We have to figure out which we value more. Better to lose sand that we may gain gold.

Now evaluating rightly requires knowing what we stand to lose. Jesus speaks of entering life and the kingdom of God. The OT predicted a time when our world would be filled with the glory and

knowledge of God; when all men would come and worship Yahweh and learn his law. That time is coming and we call it the kingdom of God. That's what we stand to lose if we will not cut off whatever stumbles us.

And Jesus gives us a few details about the other destination. Honestly, I'm not sure we know a great deal about heaven or hell, beyond the obvious. But we do know some. Here are a few things Jesus tells us here about hell.

First, the word Jesus uses is "Gehenna." This word was used by the rabbi's of Jesus' time and before to speak of final damnation for sinners. It actually refers to an area south of Jerusalem which, in the OT times of Israel's apostasy, was used for idol worship. When King Josiah came to power toward the end of the kingdom period he defiled the area as part of his religious reform. After that the area became a trash dump; they burned their trash so that eventually it became a perpetually smoldering garbage heap. That's the word Jesus uses for hell.

So from this word we have the idea of perpetual fire; of course it speaks also of destruction, since fire destroys.

Second, Jesus quotes the last chapter of Isaiah to speak of the perpetuity of the suffering and destruction of hell. That place in Isaiah talks about God's end times judgment on transgressors. Fire only burns until it has no more fuel, then it goes out; but not hell fire. Hell fire just keeps on burning; somehow, the suffering and destruction never stop.

Likewise, worms eat garbage or corpses only until either they die or there is nothing left to eat. But not Isaiah's worm; this worm never dies, and so it never stops eating. Again, somehow, the suffering and destruction never cease.

But how can destruction never cease? When I burn the log eventually all that's left is ash and the fire goes out; how does one destroy forever? I hardly know. Of course God made men to live forever, so whatever judgment he assigns them to reasonably lasts forever. But how you break something down forever without it ever being fully broken down I don't know.

And this is why I said we don't know a great deal about heaven and hell beyond the basics. However, there is something I think we can say.

I'm not sure the fire or the worm are literal; in fact I assume they are not, though maybe I'm wrong. What I suspect is this: Whatever hell really is, whatever is there in the ultimate divine

condemnation, I figure it is so horrible that fire, darkness, and worms very likely might seem a light punishment by comparison.

What Then?

So what is Jesus' conclusion? What should we do? Jesus makes a few obscure statements about salt and fire to end this text, but probably we have a decent idea what he's talking about.

When he speaks of everyone being salted with fire, it seems likely he is referring to the sacrifice in Leviticus 2 which requires salt to be offered with it, or so the commentators say. If this is the right idea then Jesus is conjuring up the imagery of sacrifice by fire; we've already been looking at the imagery of fire but now it takes a different direction.

Jesus would then be speaking of his disciples as burnt offerings who are salted with the "salt of the covenant." This would refer to the complete devotion of the disciple to following Christ that he may enter the kingdom of God. If you want to see Paul talking this way look later at Romans 12.

But the point is to call his followers to total devotion; this fits the context well since Jesus has been exhorting them to part with anything necessary to enter the kingdom.

Jesus then warns about disciples losing their saltiness. In context this would speak of them losing their complete devotion to Christ, a loss which leads to the ruin of the disciples. Matthew speaks of the uselessness of the disciple who loses his salty flavor of righteousness, and he uses about the same language as here.

The point remains the same. In view of the realities of heaven and hell, and in view of the multitude of spiritual dangers we confront on a daily basis, let the followers of Christ part with anything that hinders and go on in complete devotion to Christ and the kingdom. Don't lose your saltiness, that is, your total devotion. Go on living as a salted, burnt offering, given to God alone.

All of this remind us of our need to confess our sins to God and receive forgiveness. If your sin has been uncovered at some point in this sermon, don't despair. Admit your sin to God and ask forgiveness. Believe in Christ as your sufficient atonement and have peace. Then go on in repentance and renewed obedience, doing the will of God from the heart. Amen.